

*Citation for published version:*

Dillet, B 2018, Suffocation and the Logic of Immunopolitics. in H Richter (ed.), *Biopolitical Governance: Race, Gender and Economy*. Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, pp. 235-54.

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

**University of Bath**

## **Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Suffocation and the logic of immunopolitics

Benoît Dillet (University of Bath)

When a transhumanist wants to change his body, like in bio-art (Stelarc), believing that the human is “obsolete,” it is certainly possible that waste material appears in place of what is rejected – a deject (an object of rejection). But trans-jets are unconstructible. In the notion of trans-jet [*trajet*], the root *trans-* does not refer to the capacity to do whatever one wants according to whatever ends, it is the incredible apparition of a creation that shatters all prevision. *Trans-* as transi/t... Contrary to the concept of subject, trans-jet implies the passage of time throughout places.

— Frédéric Neyrat, *Atopies*.

### 0. *The Immunopolitics Vignette*

The recent election of Donald Trump, the numerous referenda in Europe (including Brexit), the problem of immigration and refugees in Europe and the new hopes for a culture of protest have challenged the status quo and urged professional political theorists to comment on, analyse and address the new political reality shaped by these earthquakes.<sup>1</sup> These shocks were co-produced in part by a re-organisation of the material production of knowledge, information, news, as well as state action. Ten years after the invention of Facebook and YouTube, populist discourses have found new forms, from viral videos to push-notifications and suggested content. The Web giants have made this possible, and are benefiting from these new, highly charged affective spaces. The enormous concentration of power by these new tech companies should lead us to reconsider the “biopolitical paradigm” what is taking place alongside the re-structuring of power relations is an acceleration of the politics of emotion, identity and story-telling that dominate the media to a point of saturation and suffocation. The bodies of the governed have been damaged by the economic and affective violence pouring out from a politics of avoidance and security against otherness.

In many ways, the multi-faceted debate, or shall we say “field”, on biopolitics, biopower and bioethics has prefigured some of the questions that are now at the forefront of the dark futures of capitalism. As these tech companies develop new services to solve problems that were not thinkable a few years ago, they have managed to colonise life in unprecedented ways. Medicine and law are now seen as new markets for these new giants armed with algorithms, data centres, cloud services, chatbots and machine-learning gadgets.

This techno-dystopian vectorialist class disrupts management practices and produces new forms of enslavement. But what is particularly relevant for us is to examine how all this is taking place by the laying down of an “immunopolitics”, a term used by Frédéric Neyrat as an extension of Roberto Esposito’s scholarly work from the early 2000s. Immunopolitics is the permanent demand for preventive measures in the search of a total immunisation from others, bacteria, terrorism, problems, or simply, negativity. But more crucially for us, beyond

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like thank Greg Bird and Hannah Richter for their thoughtful and perceptive comments on this chapter.

the logic of scapegoating and avoidance that dominates the contemporary discourse, immunopolitics also takes place at the bio-economic, technological and ecological level. In addition to the life instinct and the death drive central to a psychoanalytical framework, Neyrat (2011, 108) adds a third drive that he calls the “drive to remain untouched” (*la pulsion de l’indemne*). It is the vital tendency towards an intact condition and inertia. Immunopolitics takes from this third drive by developing political strategies to operationalise it at the macro-level. While our hyper-connected world is dominated by networks, leaks, entanglements and fluxes, a large infrastructure is being created to immunise against risks of contagion. This chapter intends to connect the literature and the question of biopolitics to that of immunopolitics. Immunopolitics rests on a dual process of a complete protection on the one hand, and absolute distancing of undesirables on the other:

In place of bonds of community based on reciprocity, interaction and mutual expression of human relations, we would see kinds of “auto-spheres,” “intangible bodies,” via a “distancing of the other.” This production of intangibles is based on a biopolitical split, leaving to one side untouchables, pariahs, “disposable men” (Bertrand Ogilvie’s term), the poor, immigrants, and undocumented aliens, who would be related to detention centers, prisons, or hospitals. Immunized on one side of this split, exposed on the other. (Neyrat 2011, 110)

The externalisation of other forms of life in the process of immunisation is thus crucial to the reproduction of life, and the renewal of biopolitics. Transhumanism for instance is a doctrine particularly in fashion with Silicon Valley gurus (or “thought-leaders”), it claims that life can and should be enhanced to adapt to the new challenges that humanity faces. Life and technics have become one for them, by collapsing the terms of nature/culture but also nature/technics. In the introductory epigraph, Neyrat questions whether the new subjectivity that transhumanists want to put forward should not be called “deject” instead of “subject” given that the ultimate horizon of the techno-populists could very well be natural and human waste rather than super-humans. The question of *trans*-formation is crucial to biopolitics since it involves different understandings of life.<sup>2</sup>

According to Neyrat’s important recent work, one of the main impetuses of the collective inertia in face of global climate change and the drive to remain untouched is the residual humanism and productivism found in posthumanism, transhumanism and other doctrines. The protagonists of these recent intellectual movements, who write after nature and after the human, continue to argue for the self-production of humanity and use modern definitions of the human as production or *poiesis*. Beyond the logic of immunopolitics, Neyrat (2017) argues instead for an *ecology of separation*. At the end of my chapter I will come back to this emphasis on separation and explain why it is crucial for renewing the biopolitical and the geophilosophical paradigms. I will tackle the geological unconscious of biopolitics, in showing how our conception of the living and its management by contemporary biopower are changing in our Anthropocenic times.

### *1. Life after Sovereignty?*

The immense success of Michel Foucault’s notions of biopolitics and biopower has had the advantage of bringing questions about life and the body, but also the inorganic, nonlife and death to the centre of some theoretical discussions. Foucault’s concept of biopolitics has led

---

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Stiegler notes that trance as a collective state of dreaming is fundamental to psychic and collective transformations: “*trans*-forming oneself can occur (and, even, can *only* occur) in complete unconsciousness, in assuming the unconsciousness (the improbability) necessitated by this trance [*transe*], so to speak” (2016, 132).

to a proliferation of neologisms such as thanatopolitics, necropolitics, neuropolitics, neuropower, psychopower, geopower and so on. By the time Foucault's work was not only read by professional political theorists, but by graduate students all around the world, the notion of biopolitics had started to be hailed as his most political and indeed politicised notion. Giorgio Agamben famously borrowed the notion for his own philosophical project of *Homo Sacer* and turned it into his own weapon by associating the biopolitical regime of modernity with the use of camps and the logic of exclusion. Agamben was struck by Foucault's non-engagement with Hannah Arendt's work and most importantly the absence in Foucault's analysis of "the exemplary places of modern biopolitics: the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century" (Agamben 1998, 4). Similarly, Achille Mbembe (2003) has pursued Foucault's concept of biopower on other terrains in extremely productive ways. For him biopolitics is not only a regulation and management of life through the technologies of power such as birth rates, mortality rates and the development of modern statistics as part of the state apparatus. It is above all a government of death through colonial and postcolonial logics that made humans commodities and provided the framework for contemporary forms of exploitation.

Thus, the notion of biopolitics has become not only a concept but a scheme of thought and a mode of understanding. Biopolitics is not a paradigm in the humanities and social sciences, but a scheme of thought that has allowed to overcome the abstract perspectives that hold sovereignty as central notions (Goldstone 2014). Many important studies on the biological classification of populations or on biotechnologies of reproduction used this scheme of thought. The opposition between sovereignty and biopolitics continues to dominate contemporary studies in biopolitics, which in turn demonstrates the lasting legacy of Foucault's thought given that this opposition was written in the DNA of this concept.<sup>3</sup> The concept of sovereignty took an imperious dimension in 20<sup>th</sup> century political thought and is constantly re-habilitated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: "sovereignty" appears at the same time as a problem and its solution, a question and its answer. The relative stability of this scheme of thought is surprising given the dark episodes of history from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards – I am taking Hobbes' *Leviathan* and the Treaty of Westphalia as epitomes.

Thus some philosophers called for a renewal of the political discourse to find new conditions of possibility and impossibility. Foucault noted that it was long overdue for political theorists to cut off the king's head. But Roberto Esposito is probably the political philosopher who has voiced this concern most explicitly. Indeed, he notes that after the 9/11 attacks and the rise of security discourse (or sometimes called "securitisation"), a new political language is required and points to Foucault's concept of biopower as this attempt to found this new thinking. To Esposito, traditional political concepts such as sovereignty, rights, democracy, representation, liberty and the individual have become inapt to understand the mutation of current politics. He writes,

traditional political categories, such as order, but also freedom, take on meaning that forces them ever more toward the shelter of security measures. Freedom, for example, ceases to be understood as participation in the political management of the *polis* and is now recast in terms of personal security along a fault line that follows us to this very moment. (Esposito 2013, 70)

This imperative of putting "personal security" at the forefront of all politics leads Esposito to elaborate his extremely useful couple of community/immunity, centred on the notion of the *munus* (obligation or debt in Latin). This couple refers to two different fields: (1) the politico-

---

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Richter discussed this aspect in the introduction in relation to the two bodies of the king in Ernst Kantorowicz.

legal domain organised around private property and restraints imposed on political agency; (2) the biomedical domain centred on immunology studies and practices, like inoculation. I will come back to the conceptual origin of immunity in the next section, but for now it is worth remembering that this conceptual distinction is inseparable from Esposito's lucid reading of biopolitics as the knot binding politics and life together:

Contrary to the illusions of those who imagined it was possible to retroactively skip over what for them amounted to the Nazi parenthesis so as to reconstruct the governing principles of the preceding period, life and politics are bound together in a knot that can't be undone. (Esposito 2013, 75)

He notes that political philosophers all too often skip over Nazism and the redefinition of politics by Hitlerism, and pretend traditional concepts can be used as if they were transhistorical or ahistorical functions. Many theorists who analyse the life and politics knot unconsciously re-inscribe it within the frameworks of prohibition and sovereign violence. "The problem is that sovereignty is a fiction whose basic function, by definition, has been to subsume all other fictions" (Goldstone 2014, 106). As a consequence, historical periods filled with struggles were largely overlooked. By moving from sovereignty (as a scheme of thought) to biopolitics, Esposito almost apologises for studying Nazism as a coherent political philosophy (following Emmanuel Levinas' famous and important article from 1934 [Levinas 1990]). He notes that, if we were to take seriously the relations between life and politics, we need to account for Nazism as a turning point in biopolitics. Foucault himself discussed the role of race and racist discourse in biopolitics as new political objects in his 1976 lectures *Society Must Be Defended*.<sup>4</sup> In this set of lectures, Foucault mainly points to the inherent racism found in socialist states. He argued that socialist states and socialist thought also make use of biopower, but that in using this new form of power, they have pursued racist politics. Much like for his 1979 lectures on neoliberalism, where he argued that the Left needs to create a Leftist form of governmentality (Foucault 2008, 92-4), Foucault never abhorred biopower or thought naively that we could step out of biopower so easily. He knew full well the advantages of the biopolitical scheme of thought, the link to the welfare state and the improvement of people's health. Hence, his last question of this lecture series is to imagine a biopolitics freed of racism.<sup>5</sup> This question is taken up again by Esposito in his book *Bíos* when thinking an "affirmative biopolitics", a concept of life freed from racism.

Numerous scholars have used the "biopolitical paradigm" to study the state apparatus, but they often failed to historicise the use of life in politics and examine in some detail the role of this concept played in slavery, colonial projects, in overtly racial societies as well as in ecological catastrophes and biotechnological innovations. Esposito is right to pose that while the constitutive/transcendental category of Marxism is *history*, for Nazism it is *biology*. But he is perhaps too quick to think that sovereignty and rights discourses can be overcome so easily by blindly following Foucault.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Foucault defined racism as "a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault 2003, 254).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bernasconi (2015) traces Georges Canguilhem's silence on the relation between science and racism in a fascinating way. Although this is probably unintentional given his well-known commitment to the French resistance during the Second World War, his uncritical use of Kurt Goldstein and Jacob Baron von Uexküll's conceptions of the environment (as *Umwelt* and *Milieu*) makes this silence particularly problematic given their racial politics.

<sup>6</sup> "Biopolitics is primarily that which is not sovereignty" (Esposito 2008, 33). This is surprising, since for Foucault, the reader of Bataille (but also Esposito's reading of Bataille and Nancy), sovereignty is not reduced to the legal lexicon and can include the impersonal as well as the affirmative biopolitics that Esposito is imagining.

Arguably, the biopolitical paradigm has led to radically new problems in terms of management of the living, away from older concerns of survival and obedience. This shift has taken place both at the level of governmental/state practice as well as at the theoretical level. Indeed, the discredit of Marxist philosophy of history since the 1970s and the regain of interest in vitalist strands participate in the actuality of this line of thinking. This was also partly due to the fundamental change of time and temporality in politics. We find that with the advent of the biopolitical paradigm (in theory and practice), there is a forgetting of history.

Totalising systems of thought (that used these traditional concepts that we previously listed but also make constant references to the universal and the particular, or to history and spirit) became quickly outdated and rendered inoperative to account for a real that constantly displaces itself. Political projects were being largely challenged by the vast forces of capital – but not only. The immense energies of restructuration made demands on an increasingly proletarianised population to continuously adapt to new prerogatives, cancelling or interrupting all possibilities to plan the future or to organise alternatives. In these neoliberal times, the only common denominator was therefore life: life became the centre of all contemporary politics, but given that life was an object and subject largely unaccounted for in political philosophy, a new type of political epistemology therefore needed to emerge. With the development of biotechnologies, especially reproductive medicine and human genetics, life became a new market to exploit and a new domain to regulate, legally and ethically (Waldby and Cooper 2008). Thus, from the 1970s onwards which saw the disappearance of the proletarian and class politics, a shift to life became prominent. The understanding of normality and health changed with the transformation of medicine, and the new burgeoning field of bioethics was set up to organise public debates on these issues – with limited success.<sup>7</sup>

## *2. Biopolitics at work: from immunity to immunopolitics*

This new political vocabulary – that Esposito is working with and working towards – has a longer genealogy in post-1945 continental philosophy. Indeed, Esposito's deconstruction of the political could not have been thinkable – if it is thinkable at all – without this philosophical community that worked at a vitalist philosophy against dialectical thought after 1945.<sup>8</sup> These new modes of thinking often attempted to account for discontinuities, fragments and events rather than long-term structures and continuities. Yet, this knot between life and politics is impossible to unravel, since when politics has come to manage and organise life, it cannot simply be undone. Esposito's new vocabulary (biopolitics, immunity, community) is crucial to grasp what is at stake the logic of immunopolitics introduced in the first section.

Concepts such as biopolitics, immunity, community are not transcendental concepts that attempt to found a pure morality, with universal pretence, but function locally and historically. By navigating between the concepts of biopolitics, immunity, community and existential territories, we can avoid the strict oppositional thinking of the

---

<sup>7</sup> “It is safe to say, then, that since the 1970s ‘life’ has become a reference point for political thinking and political action in two respects. On the one hand, we can say the human ‘environment’ is threatened by the existing social economic structures and that policy-makers need to find the right answers to the ecological question and to secure the conditions of life on Earth and the survival of humanity. On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know, because of bioscientific discoveries and technological innovations, what exactly the “natural foundations” of life are and how these can be distinguished from “artificial” forms of life”. (Lemke 2011, 27)

<sup>8</sup> For a short overview of the deconstruction of traditional political categories in the work of Foucault see also Judith Revel (2009).

immunity/community couple. The path between the task of describing and the task of marking a world is a narrow one. Only on this path is there a possibility to add more terms: to take into consideration new factors and variables, but also to craft new political concepts.

Intuitively, we would think that if immunity is the present condition of our time that Esposito invites us to critique, community then stands as the positive (and only?) contender to replace it. Yet, things get murkier since there is a long tradition in liberal thought that opposes the individual to the community. The notion of “community” is often problematically reduced to a liberal communitarian meaning, in which sharing, in an undifferentiated way, ends up constructing a “wider subjectivity”, as Esposito (2010, 2) aptly refers to it.<sup>9</sup> Discourses on the community come from a nostalgic yearning for an idealised community that never was, but somehow is thought to have existed. Both Jean-Luc Nancy, in his famous book *The Inoperative Community* published in 1991 (the article was originally published in 1983), and Esposito, in his 1998 work *Communitas*, begin their books by making a distinction between the liberal conception of community and a deconstructive understanding of the term.<sup>10</sup> Both philosophers thus expose the repetitive impulse contained in regretting the dislocation of an ideal community that never was. But this repetitive impulse is not only a foundational part of liberal thought, it is also widely shared as a constitutive principle in some sociological studies that are loosely inspired by Marxist or critical theory. Geoffroy de Lagasnerie (2012) is right that neoliberalism is often misunderstood when it is simply denounced by sociologists as a negative force (deregulation, disorder, decomposition, destruction, separation and atomisation of social life). This negative force is then often opposed to the necessity of social cohesion and collective power.

Biopolitics, much like neoliberalism, is not the dislocation of a previously tied unity, but the redistribution of conceptual and practical terms in politics. It is not in itself conservative or oppressive or productive of change, it is a new operation to classify and manage biological, social and technical life. To put it differently, biopolitics and neoliberalism are often thought in terms of lack, but Foucault taught us to analyse instead the productive aspects of these new governmental rationalities. Foucault asks us to think through these rationalities before we can even think of dismantling them. While biopolitics is partly tied to new governmental practices, institutional innovations and new prerogatives (concerned with birth, mortality rates, health, disease, hygiene and so on), these practices cannot be examined independently of the breakthroughs in biology with the “discoveries” of the genome and the DNA in 1962 and 1965 respectively. As Giuseppe Bianco and Miguel de Beistegui noted, these results and advances in molecular biology challenged the old doctrine of vitalism together with the old concept of life:

If, after the discovery of DNA, and in the eyes of the positivist biologists such as Jacob, Monod and Lwoff, the concept of life was no longer necessary, Foucault’s claim is that it did not yet exist in the eighteenth century. The life of life itself unfolds between that *no longer*, which marks the ‘death’ of a concept, and the *not yet*, which signals its birth. Jacob and Monod claimed that life was a useless concept in biology, Foucault was more nuanced and suggested that the historical transcendental, or the *episteme*, which dominated Western culture for 150 years – and in which a specific conception of life,

---

<sup>9</sup> The phrase is originally from the liberal communitarian political philosopher Michael Sandel.

<sup>10</sup> “The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer (by virtue of some unknown decree or necessity, for we bear witness also to the exhaustion of thinking through History), is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community”. (Nancy 1991, 1)

labour and language played a major role – was probably destined to change. (Bianco and de Beistegui 2015, 3)

While Foucault diagnosed the end of man in *The Order of Things* in 1966, following Claude Lévi-Strauss's famous statements about the dissolution of "man" as an operative category in anthropology, the same Foucault 10 years later introduced the notions of biopolitics and biopower in relation to political economy and the state's increasing concern in people's health (Lemm and Vatter 2014). The core of the regime of sovereignty and sovereign power from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was an "anatomy-politics" of the governed body. With biopower, normalisation and the use of public statistics in the modern state institutions, the core moved to a biopolitics of population or species-being. The subject of politics has therefore changed from the human body to the population.

The obsolescence of the notion of life in molecular biology – replaced by the emphasis on message or code, borrowed from cybernetics – did not eradicate the notion from the other fields of inquiry, quite the contrary. In assessing the revolutions in molecular biology and the life sciences, Georges Canguilhem argued that this change of language and perspective did not take into consideration the "subject of the knowledge of life": the biologist (François Jacob) "ignores the *subject* who is posing the question" (Bianco and de Beistegui 2015, 6). This is where the work of the philosopher (Foucault) is crucial since it focuses on the normative power (or "normalisation") at play in the changes of conception of life in ethics, biology as well as in politics, particularly with the creation of the welfare state. New definitions of life in life sciences have also consequences on politics and ethics; for instance, the biologist Jacques Monod "introduce[d] the category of teleonomy and want[ed] to deduce an ethics from biology" (Bianco and de Beistegui 2015, 6). In short, while governmental agencies and political theorists have attempted to rethink the management of life institutionally but also ethically, some molecular biologists like Jacob and Monod wanted to show the political and ethical relevance of their work. Revolutions in biology made the discipline the royal science and biological metaphors were increasingly used in social sciences and in policies to align with this progress. This move was for instance supported by the increasing rhetoric of the "self-organisation" of financial markets, partly by equating organisms, complex systems and impersonal rationality (Connolly 2013). However, as Catherine Malabou (2016) has recently argued, political theorists have an anti-biological bias. They continue to oppose the "natural body" to "symbolic life", failing to see the differentiating possibilities of the living, deconstructing the understanding of the living as "programme". To her, even Foucault and Agamben fail to account for "the revolutionary discoveries of molecular and cellular biology", in particular the operating categories of epigenesis and cloning, which "are the very ones able to renew the political question" (Malabou 2016, 431).<sup>11</sup> This is where Esposito's concept of immunity in relation to community allows us to think the differentiating relations between life and politics.

His concept of immunity owes to Nancy's work on community. It is worth remembering that Nancy's understanding of community as *Mitsein* (being-with) draws directly from Heidegger, who had already surpassed the liberal metaphysics of subjectivity with his concept of *Dasein* (being-there). For Nancy, community is not a collection of

---

<sup>11</sup> Malabou concludes that the recent breakthroughs in molecular and cellular biology offer a power of resistance to biopolitics "in asserting the coincidence of the symbolic and the biological. There is but one life, one life only" (2016, 438). This is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is necessary to briefly show the limits of Malabou's own argument that verges on neurocentrism and biological reductionism. Malabou excludes *de jure* the technological question, looking for the way life repairs itself without having recourse to prostheses, grafting techniques and other incursions of the inorganic, assuming that the body can operate a kind of self-deconstruction of its programme and identity by actualising the new biological potentials.



individuals or a totality, but a being understood as a movement towards the other: a *clinamen*.<sup>12</sup> What defines community for Nancy is ecstasy, this experience of being outside of oneself, or in other words, the forces of this outside that is nothing other than the rejection of an impossible interiority” (Nancy 1991, 4). Community is not a territory and space shared in common but the experience of sharing. This experience is itself enough to weave relations and “incompletion is its principle” (Nancy 1991, 35).

The notion of immunity then serves not only to associate the liberal-communitarian term of community with the desire to form a new immune system of enclaves and *ethnos*, and therefore reversing the very notion of community into immunity, but also to show that what is at stake is the entanglement of the *munus*, translated as obligation or debt. In his book *Immunitas*, Esposito traces the origin of the term “immunity” from the Latin *immunitas* or *immunis* as what negates or lacks the *munus*, where *munus* refers to “an office – a task, obligation, duty (also in the sense of a gift to be repaid)” (2011, 5). Thus, *communitas* is in the first instance the sharing of the *munus*, while *immunitas* is the exemption from the obligation.<sup>13</sup> This philological coup opens up a new field of inquiry for political philosophy. To simplify Esposito’s argument to the extreme, we can say that community centres on the social life of debt, while the protection and negation of obligations define his notion of immunity. We should note that this is not primarily debt in an economic sense, but a debt from the anthropological perspective, necessary to social relations. But much like Nietzsche’s own commentaries on debt, this anthropological perspective can be also extended to the economic sphere.

Hence, *immunitas* is the condition when someone who does not repay the gift that he owes. This immunisation does not simply operate at the level of individuals as “atoms”, but also at the level of communities (in the sense of communitarians) and of society in general (institutions, generations, and the arts). The challenge for Esposito is therefore to locate the processes of subjectivation at work in the *socius*. These are impersonal singularities but they are yet not independent and fully formed, the question then is how do they hang together?

Neyrat (2010) borrows the conceptual apparatus of Esposito to think our contemporary condition as *immunopolitics*. The legal definition of immunity is the exemption to the common law: a positive norm of exception that is applicable to exceptional legal persons (politicians). Immunity is a special protection in the legal system, while in medical terms, the immunity system is what protects the body from being affected by a disease. Immunity seems at first to mark the separation between an inside and an outside but it is important to note that for both Esposito and Neyrat, immunity is what is exempted from otherness and the outside: “*immunis* is he or she who has no obligations toward the other and can therefore conserve his or her own essence intact as a subject and owner of himself or herself” (Esposito 2013, 39). Hence the new terminology that Esposito was long looking for began maturing with this community/immunity dialectic that he mobilises in his work from the 2000s. While Esposito refers to broad historical periods and traditions of thought, Neyrat on the other hand allows us to think more concretely the emergencies of the world: finance, ecology and technology.

Neyrat is the name of a formidable conceptual abstract machine: not a person but the metaphysical *topos* (*atopos*) from which endless conceptual projections gush out; an abstract machine that wants to give back the grandeur of philosophical thinking, by pushing thinking

---

<sup>12</sup> “One cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a *clinamen*. There has to be an inclination from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other. Community is at least the *clinamen* of the ‘individual’”. (Nancy 1991, 4).

<sup>13</sup> The community/immunity dialectic mirrors the improper/proper couple that Esposito also develops (Bird 2016).

to its limits. Globalisation is the project of interconnectedness that paradoxically realises the immunological drive or the drive to remain untouched. While we would think that, with globalisation, encounters with otherness are more common, for Neyrat it is nothing other than the closing of the outside: an *exophobia*. In many ways, his philosophical thought continues that of Esposito's affirmative philosophy (the impersonal, affirmative biopolitics) as well as Nancy's more recent work on politics and democracy, which I will now turn to.<sup>14</sup> But Neyrat does this by operationalising the speculative movements of both thought to concrete problems: especially global climate change. Given the ecological emergencies, the only realist move is to develop a speculative thought. I will explain why this is also connected to Neyrat's own conception of "saturated immanence" (everything is in flux, everything is turned into flows of images, capital, and other commodified "bits").

### 3. Singularities and the Politics of Separation

What does this have to do with biopolitics? Existence means to stand outside of the self, Neyrat reminds us. Thus the project of producing differences for the existence has consequences for biopolitics. The refusal and exclusion of all otherness and outsides (what he calls "exophobia") from the liberal ontology means that there is no room for developing ex-centric existential territories. Neyrat suggests moving "from a politics *over* life to a politics *of* life" (Esposito 2013, 77; Neyrat 2010, 36). Esposito's answer was to find a third term (the impersonal) beyond the person-subject ("I") as well as the infinite ethical demands of the other ("You"). Esposito's project of an affirmative biopolitics is based on life as an impersonal force, "creating an opening to a set of forces that push it beyond its logical, and even grammatical boundaries" (Esposito 2012, 14). Rather than being a critique of the state of affairs, the impersonal is a tradition of thought, according to him, that can be recovered against a biopolitics that turns into a thanatopolitics, that is when a biopolitics defines life too strictly. Thanatopolitics and negative biopolitics begin when only a specific type of life (the proper one) can be accepted. To give content to this impersonality Esposito examines in detail three forms of the impersonal in *Third Person*: universal justice (in Simone Weil), writing (Maurice Blanchot) and life (Gilles Deleuze). Malabou would argue on the contrary that defecting resistance to an external impersonality fails to recognise the auto-affection and self-deconstruction contained within the structure of the living (its "plasticity"). Malabou's notion of plasticity can come close to Esposito's own conceptualisation of the immune system as 'the ever-changing product of a dynamic, competitive interaction with the environment rather than a definitive and inalterable given' (Esposito 2011, 166). It is not always clear in Esposito how his work on the impersonal fits within his immunity/community dialectic that we previously discussed.

Malabou is right to both critique the opposition between biological and symbolic life and emphasise an enriched and dynamic conception of life, that for instance account for the self-repairing capacities of the body. Yet as I noted earlier, Malabou does not see the technical life of humans, the transductive relations of the *bios* with both *technē* and *geos*. But this is also the case in Esposito's meditations on the impersonal. Indeed, what is often missing from Esposito is the question of technology, except when he turns in *Immunitas* to biotechnologies and medicine. It is precisely because the definition of immunity is widely accepted as the production of antibodies or any other immunological reaction by an organism

---

<sup>14</sup> Greg Bird (2016, 155) usefully writes about the main divergence between Esposito and Nancy: "both insist that if there is a major point of contention, it is where each places their emphasis: Nancy focuses on the *cum*, while Esposito the *munus*". Neyrat (2013, 25) uses the term "Co-Oriented Ontology" to define Nancy's thought, as a response to the famous Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).

against foreign materials or anything that is not part of that organism, that biology and politics have found a common ground. The “dispositif of immunisation” is the edge of the spectrum that constantly threatens contemporary politics, by the promise of a sufficient amount of protection that can prevent foreign bodies from attacking. Thus when he refers to biotechnologies, he remains at the level of metaphors to demonstrate the porosity between the biological language and the political lexicon. What he cannot think is the technicity of the human, especially in relation to nonhumans and the Earth system. Nancy, Stiegler and Gilbert Simondon have taught us that the contemporary form of life is the negotiation between nature and technics. This is a radical displacement from a humanist and modernist perspective:

Politics is thus implicitly nothing other than the auto-management of ecotechnology, the only form of possible “auto”-nomy that precisely no longer has recourse to any heretofore possible forms of a politics: neither the self-founding “sovereignty,” since it is no longer a matter of founding, nor the “discussion concerning the justice” of an Aristotelian *polis*, since there is no longer a *polis*, nor even the contestation or the *differend*, since living and power go in the same direction according to an asymptomatic consensus and devoid of finality, or of truth.

The term *biopolitics* in fact designates neither life (as the form of life) nor politics (as a form of coexistence). And we can certainly admit that in fact we are no longer in a position to use either of these terms in any of their ordinary senses. Both are, rather, henceforth subject to what carries them together into ecotechnology. (Nancy 2007, 94)

In this text on globalisation from 2002, Nancy presents a rare assertiveness in alerting us to the emergence of a new condition: *general equivalence*. The ills of capitalism consist in killing off the creative aspects of singularities and sense. The capitalist ontology interrupts “world-forming” processes (*le faire-monde* in French) by reducing all things and beings to the same common denominator (exchange-value).<sup>15</sup> For Nancy, singularities are thus defined in the negative. For instance enjoyment is a “shared appropriation... of what cannot be accumulated or what is not equivalent, that is, of value itself (or of meaning) in the singularity of its creation” (Nancy 2007, 46). The creation of a world through the production of singularities which are not productive or accumulatable is “the greatest risk that humanity has had to confront” (Nancy 2007, 53), but it is also a “task that can only be a struggle”, a struggle of the West against itself. In short, for Nancy, what the discourse on biopolitics does not want to take into account is the “becoming-technical of the world” – or ecotechnics – and this is essential since the body itself is characterised as essentially plastic and technical (Cortés Lagunas 2012). This becoming-technical of the world should be confronted by a politics of singularities as well as “separation”, as we will see with Neyrat.

The power of Neyrat’s work is to have integrated Nancy’s concerns about the becoming-technical of the world and the critique general equivalence as “integral humanism” and “saturated immanence”. The problem with biopolitics, which is in fact an ecotechnical power, is not globalisation as such, but “hominisation” as a process (Neyrat 2015a, 23). Hominisation began with the first cave paintings more than 30,000 years ago, but even earlier than that (2 to 3 million years ago) there were other forms of symbolisation that modified both the physical strata of the Earth as well as the socio-psychic strata of the humans as species-being (Stiegler 2017, 50). In this sense, an inquiry into ecotechnics leads us to questions about palaeoanthropology or even palaeopolitics, since the production of artefacts and technical objects is constitutive of the processes of hominisation in “deep history”. These artefacts are themselves processes of symbolisation that constantly modify hominisation. Biopolitics and

---

<sup>15</sup> ‘Capitalism exposes the inverted form of an absolute and singular value through general equivalence’ (Nancy 2007: 120).

ecotechnics are therefore, for Neyrat, consequences of a broader movement that he calls “integral humanism” – leading him to write that “capitalism is a humanism” (Neyrat 2015a, 40-2). Philosophers who have argued against the essence of the human or anthropocentrism, whether they are humanists, posthumanists, or transhumanists, tend to argue for a residual productivism. The human is nothing, but can become anything or anyone, such is the slogan of the humanist tradition, revisited by the new spirit of capitalism: the entrepreneur of the self is defined by plasticity, flexibility, availability and fluidity, he or she can give himself or herself any form. The point is therefore not to argue for passivity or absolute consumption/consummation of energy and matter, but to read contemporary philosophical discourses in light of the event of the Anthropocene (or Capitalocene). This is precisely the new challenge for the biopolitical paradigm, to enter into conversation with the environmental humanities and account for the fact that human life has become a geological force. Biopolitics needs to resist the *exophobia* of immunopolitics, this would consist in opposing the government of the living and the geological processes of the earth.

This new epoch is envisaged as an event, and much like modernity is often thought as an event and a revolution in thought as well as action. In his last book *Defiant Earth*, Clive Hamilton (2017) argues that although environmental philosophers are writing against anthropocentrism to account for nonhuman beings and nature, they have yet to change their understanding of the environment to account for the Earth System as an ever-evolving complex totality. He uses the German term *Erlebnis* to refer to this event as a disruptive episode, recasting the German romantics and a change in feeling. In these times of acceleration, this change in feeling will necessitate new regimes of symbolisation that draw from sources other than integral humanism which advocates de-inhibition (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016) and uninjuredness (Neyrat uses the French word *indemne*). To Hamilton, what ecological thought has yet to integrate is that humans have disturbed the functioning of the earth and this will result in immense consequences for the adaptation of humans to their new habitat and for the survival of many species. It is no longer (only) about protecting the environment and working at the micro-level, but about thinking a macro-ecopolitics that constantly connects to local problems and cosmotechnics – what Félix Guattari called “existential territories”. Guattari voiced this concern about global climate change as an event in a different vocabulary in 1989, when Earth system science was in its embryonic state:

Throughout history and across the world existential cartographies founded on a conscious acceptance of certain ‘existentializing’ ruptures of meaning have sought refuge in art and religion. However, today the huge subjective void produced by the proliferating production of material and immaterial goods is becoming ever more absurd and increasingly irreparable and threatens the consistency of both individual and group existential Territories. (Guattari 2000, 46)

Now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere and the social and individual Universes of reference, we must learn to think ‘transversally’. (Guattari 2000, 43)

This transversal thinking prefigures Hamilton’s call for a revolution of feeling, while his emphasis on existential territories recalls our earlier analyses of the “creation of a world” in Nancy (a process interrupted by the general equivalence and the flat ontology of capitalism). Guattari forged the concept of “existential territories” to think precisely of the creative processes of producing relations between singularities at the psychic and social levels. In this geological turn of political theory, in which geopower has trumped biopower as the focus, the very meaning of life that we discussed at the beginning of this chapter has also changed.

Hamilton notes that the modernist scheme of thought continues to see nature as a loving and nurturing agent (Mother Nature) instead of following Bruno Latour and other geoscientists who conceive nature as “Gaia”, a vindictive and revengeful Greek goddess:

Our understanding of the Earth we inhabit is undergoing a radical change. The modern ideas of the Earth as the environment in which humans make their home, or as a knowable collection of ecosystems more or less disturbed by humans, is being replaced by the conception of an inscrutable and unpredictable entity with a violent history and volatile ‘mood swings.’ Earth System scientists have reached for rough metaphors to capture this new idea – images of ‘the wakened giant’ and ‘the ornery beast,’ of Gaia ‘fighting back’ and seeking ‘revenge,’ a world of ‘angry summers’ and ‘death spirals’. (Hamilton 2017, 47)

Yet as Danielle Sands (2015) argues so convincingly, the problem is that all these metaphors and images reproduce gender fantasies from the Holocene: a woman that is angry, revengeful and full of “mood swings”. This lack of imagination and creativity prevents us from grasping this “unfolding event of colossal proportions” (Hamilton 2017, ix). To be worthy of the global climate change as an event would certainly mean to develop a vocabulary and a series of concepts that allow us to grasp the immensity of this new geological condition. The Anthropocene asks us to answer the question “‘what to do’ *after* ‘having done’” (Baranzoni 2017). Another point that is difficult to accept in Hamilton’s last book is his plea for a “new anthropocentrism” (Hamilton 2017, 50-8) that does not conform to the old humanist anthropocentrism. For him, the Earth System thinking challenges the foundation of the dominant environmental discourse and its anti-anthropocentrism. Earth System thinking accounts for a positive agency – the earth as a complex system – that was missing from most strands of environmentalism.

Finally, Neyrat’s ecology of separation builds on all these theories and perspectives, especially about the role of technologies and technoscientific knowledge in geopolitics, but without attempting to “reset modernity” (Latour) or to bring back anthropocentrism. Neyrat’s perspective is much closer to climate justice movements and the tradition of environmental justice. He begins with recognising the entanglements of beings and their increasing interconnectedness to propose a political ecology that distinguishes between forms and modes of existence. The flat ontology of capitalism poses a world without outside, without distance and without the “capacity to draw back” (Neyrat 2017, 101):

To be truly political, to take into consideration the dangers which may threaten us, to *distinguish* between that which humans may construct and that which *cannot* or *should not* be constructed, to know in what ways it is still possible to use the words “nature” and “environment,” to enable the ecosystems to be resilient and to endure the disasters of the Anthropocene, ecology must *leave space* for separation. (Neyrat 2017, 102)

However, it should be clear that an ecology of separation is not advocating a return to essentialism and modern ontological dualisms of nature/culture, nature/artifice, body/spirit, man/woman and so on. Neyrat makes the important distinction between separation and split or cleavage (*clivage*): splits do not leave room for interdependence and relations, while separations – much like the shared experience of Nancy’s community – are not physical exclusions, but relational disjunctions concerned with existential difference (Albernaz 2016). Neyrat’s position against new materialists and eco-constructivists is not absolute, but instrumental; the critique of the Great Divide was certainly useful but is not enough to think and live in Anthropocenic times.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to show three main things. First I argue that the traditional opposition between sovereignty and biopower is often artificial, and that sovereignty as a scheme of thought is more pervasive than is sometimes accounted for in biopolitical studies. Second, I demonstrated how contemporary biopolitics is best thought of as immunopolitics, by following the work of Esposito and Neyrat. Modern societies and human collectives have changed their relation to the *munus*, they feel exempted from obligations and duties – and equating taxes with a burden is particularly symptomatic of this exemption. As a complement to the existing life-affirming and death drives, Neyrat noted that a third drive is central to biopolitical rationality: the drive to remain untouched. This drive is further strengthened by a large technical, political and financial infrastructure that is created by the increasing interconnectedness produced by globalisation. Nancy on the other hand argued that the becoming-technical of the world is the dominant feature of globalisation; the biopolitical discourse documents this becoming-technical when analysing the management of life, birth and mortality rates, reproductive medicine, post-Fordist exploitation of life as affective and digital labour and so on. Thus, Nancy poses that biopolitics should be thought in terms of ecotechnics instead. Therefore my brief turn to ecology and global climate change, since the intersectional politics to come can only take place if it reunites the four axes: race, gender, class and nature (Keucheyan 2016, 5). As Esposito's affirmative biopolitics is rather abstract and disconnected from practical politics, particularly the issues of climate change and technological disruption, it is then Neyrat's proposition for an ecology of separation that provides new theoretical insights to confront more directly the political emergencies of our time.

#### Bibliography

- Albernaz, Joseph. 2015. "Absolved of the Absolute." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 4<sup>th</sup> November, <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/absolved-of-the-absolute/>>.
- Baranzoni, Sara. 2017. "Anthropocenic Times: Stratigraphy of a Passage," *Azimuth* 9:1.
- Bernasconi, Robert. 2015. 'The Racial Politics of Life Itself: Goldstein, Uexhüll, Canguilhem and Fanon', in M. de Beistegui, G. Bianco and M. Gracieuse (eds), *The Care of Life: Transdisciplinary Perspectives in Bioethics and Biopolitics*, 121-134, London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Bonneuil, Christophe and Jean-Baptiste. Fressoz. 2016. *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*. Translated by David Fernbach. London: Verso.
- Bianco, Giuseppe with Miguel de Beistegui. 2015. "Introduction: Life: Who Cares?" In *The Care of Life: Transdisciplinary Perspectives in Bioethics and Biopolitics* edited by Miguel de Beistegui, Giuseppe Bianco and Marjorie Gracieuse, 1-21. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Bird, Greg. 2016. *Containing Community: From Political Economy to Ontology in Agamben, Esposito, and Nancy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Connolly, William. 2013. *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organising Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*. Duke: Duke University Press.
- Cortés Lagunas, Nadia. 2012. "Sur l'écotechnie du corps." Presentation at Bernard Stiegler's Summer Academy. Épineuil-le-Fleuriel (France), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6E95Q2on90>>.

- de Lagasnerie, Geoffroy. 2012. *La Dernière leçon de Michel Foucault: Sur le néolibéralisme, la théorie et la politique*. Paris: Fayard.
- Esposito, Roberto. 2010. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Esposito, Roberto. 2011. *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity.
- Esposito, Roberto. 2012. *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity.
- Esposito, Roberto. 2013. *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*. Translated by Rhiannon Noel Welch. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2003. "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Translated David Macey. New York: Picador.
- Goldstone, Brian. 2014. "Life After Sovereignty." *History of the Present* 4(1), 97-113.
- Guattari, Félix. 2000. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London: The Athlone Press.
- Hamilton, Clive. 2017. *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Keucheyan, Razmig. 2016. *Nature is a Battlefield: For a Political Ecology*, trans. D. Broder, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lemke, Thomas. 2011. *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. Translated by Eric Frederick Trump. New York: New York University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1990. "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." Translated Séan Hand. *Critical Inquiry*, 17(1), 62-71.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2016. "One Life Only: Biological Resistance, Political Resistance." Translated by Carolyn Shread. *Critical Inquiry* 42(3), 429-438.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1991. *The Inoperative Community*. Translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2007. *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*. Translated by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2010. "The Birth of Immunopolitics." Translated Arne de Boever. *Parrhesia*, 10, 31-38.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2011. "Intact." Translated Roxanne Lapidus. *SubStance*, 40(3), 105-114.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2013. *Le Communisme existentiel de Jean-Luc Nancy*. Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2014. *Atopies: Manifeste pour la philosophie*. Caen: Éditions Nous.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2015a. *Homo Labyrinthus: Humanisme, Antihumanisme, Posthumanisme*. Arles: Éditions Dehors.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2015b. "Economy of Turbulence: How to Escape from the Global State of Emergency?" *Philosophy Today* 59(4), 657-669.

- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2016a. 'The Biopolitics of Catastrophe, or How to Avert the Past and Regulate the Future', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115(2), 247-265.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2016b. *La Part Inconstructible de la Terre*, Paris: Le Seuil.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2016c. "Returning from Afar: Returns in slight delay on *La part inconstructible de la Terre*." Translated by Jean-Sébastien Laberge, *La Deleuziana* 4, 11-18.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2017. "Elements for an ecology of separation: Beyond ecological constructivism." In *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, edited by Erich Hörl with James Burton, 101-128. London: Bloomsbury.
- Revel, Judith. 2009. "Identity, Nature, Life: Three Biopolitical Deconstructions." *Theory, Culture and Society* 26(6), 45-54.
- Sands, Danielle. 2015. "Gaia, Gender, and Sovereignty in the Anthropocene." *philoSOPHIA* 5(2), 287-307.
- Stiegler, Bernard .2016. *Automatic Society, Vol. 1: The Future of Work*. Translated by Daniel Ross, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Stiegler, Bernard. 2017. *Philosophising by Accident: Interviews with Élie During*, translated by Benoît Dillet. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Waldby, Catherine and Melinda Cooper. 2008. "The Biopolitics of Reproduction: Post-Fordist Biotechnology and Women's Clinical Labour." *Australian Feminist Studies* 23(55), 57-73.